

Perkins, Brandon

From: Fisher, Kenneth
Sent: Thursday, June 27, 2013 10:00 AM
To: Soderlund, Dianne; Albright, Rick; Holsman, Marianne; Kawabata, Sylvia; Perkins, Brandon
Subject: Hopkins seeks federal help with sulfolane

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Posted: Thursday, June 27, 2013 12:00 am

Hopkins seeks federal help with sulfolane [Jeff Richardson/jrichardson@newsminer.com](#) | 7 comments

FAIRBANKS — Fairbanks North Star Borough Mayor Luke Hopkins has requested \$30 million in federal funds to expand the North Pole water system to areas affected by contaminated groundwater. Hopkins, who asked the Environmental Protection Agency for the funding during a visit earlier this month to Washington, D.C., admits the request is a long shot. After years of frustrating delays, he said, it's time for more aggressive steps toward a long-term solution.

"We keep getting these hurdles," he said. "From my point of view, I'm tired of the hurdles."

The water-system expansion is proposed for an area where groundwater is tainted by sulfolane. The industrial solvent was first discovered in North Pole water in 2009 and was subsequently traced back to an old spill at the nearby Flint Hills Resources refinery.

According to the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, about 300 North Pole-area homes have sulfolane-fouled water. Flint Hills and the previous owner of the refinery, Williams Petroleum, are in a legal dispute regarding who is ultimately responsible for dealing with the problem.

Meanwhile, Hopkins said, he's run out of patience with the slow-moving process. DEC, which had targeted last December as the time to release a cleanup plan, has revised that schedule to 2015. Flint Hills now provides affected homes with delivered water, but Hopkins said the borough should pursue a long-term solution that addresses the tainted water.

"I don't want to have a borough area left with a groundwater pollution problem," Hopkins said.

Hopkins said DEC and EPA are logical first points to ask for funding — they both work on clean-water issues — and those agencies can then decide whether to pursue money from other parties. He said that neither the borough nor the city of North Pole should be saddled with the bill.

Hopkins said he was told EPA is unlikely to have the funding for the project, but he felt it was important to make a request from the federal agency.

Former North Pole Mayor Doug Isaacson — now an Alaska legislator — previously sought DEC money in 2011 to extend the city water system to outlying areas. The proposal, however, won little support at the state level and raised concerns among some residents of outlying areas that it could lead to annexation into the city of North Pole.

Tamara Cardona, the sulfolane project manager for the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, said an expansion of the water system could be a good long-term solution to the sulfolane problem.

"We would support it," Cardona said. "It's certainly an alternative that's very viable — probably one of the best alternatives."

A spokesman for Flint Hills said that remedies are already in place and didn't endorse an expansion of the water system.

"All affected citizens are being protected through monitoring programs or alternative water solutions that are already installed," Jeff Cook wrote in an email. "Flint Hills Resources Alaska is committed to making sure this continues."

Officials have also explored a technique called "air sparging" that injects air into groundwater. Adding oxygen to the groundwater has been effective in a limited test — concentrations as high as 146 parts per billion were rendered undetectable, according to DEC.

However, Cardona said envisioning it as a broad solution to sulfolane-tainted groundwater may be premature. The pilot test was done in shallow water — about 20 feet below the water table — but some areas tainted by sulfolane are at 300 feet deep or more. Cardona said it's also unclear whether the chemical is completely broken down in the process, or whether it will work in an area as large as the contaminated zone.

She said more study is needed to provide more clarity.

"There's still questions about how it will be done on a larger scale," Cardona said.

Hopkins said DEC should test it on individual owners' water supplies. He feels the process is being dragged out because it will likely be costly.

"I'm told by many different entities that's going to be really expensive," Hopkins said. "I don't care — I want it done for the residents there."

Cook wrote in an email that air sparging is one of "multiple cleanup technologies" that is being looked at. He said the evaluation process is underway.

"The air sparging pilot has been completed, and it could be a useful part of an onsite remedy," Cook wrote.

Contact staff writer Jeff Richardson at 459-7518.

http://www.newsminer.com/news/local_news/hopkins-seeks-federal-help-with-sulfolane/article_15d67cca-deff-11e2-80e9-0019bb30f31a.html

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